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DUE TO the congressional debate on Monday, this story was not reported in Tuesday's edition.

BY BILL HESS

Herald/Review SIERRA VISTA — Addressing the numerous rural water issues in Arizona could possibly lead to a pilot program in the Sierra Vista Subwatershed.

But before that happens, the public will have lots of input, said Arizona Department of Water Resources Director Herb Guenther.

On Monday, he spoke to more than 100 people about the Statewide Water Advisory Group and how its 52 members, representing a number of stakeholders interested in water issues, have been working on finding solutions for the state's rural areas.

Some in the audience were not convinced the creation of a Regional Water Management and Development District was needed in the Sierra Vista Subwatershed.

Some expressed concerns that such a district, created by legislative fiat, would stop subdivisions, require the monitoring of private wells and become another burdensome bureaucracy that will end up with people paying extra costs.

**Water in Arizona**

Before responding to questions and concerns, Guenther talked about water problems facing Arizona.

The good news is "we have a lot of water in Arizona," Guenther said.

The bad side of the news is "we don't have it where we need it," he said.

As growth continues in the state, it is happening in areas where people want to live but where water is either lacking or almost nonexistent, Guenther said.

Five Active Management Areas have been established in the state, where tough rules are in place when it comes to using surface water.

In other areas, groundwater pumping is the main source. State law does not allow for the creation of a groundwater AMA.

With 37 percent coming from groundwater, 36 percent from the Colorado River, 18 percent from other river basins and the remainder from reclaimed water, the state must address the growing rural areas to ensure the water is used the best way, Guenther said.

The state is also facing a problem that rivers used as sources of water have been dropping in the

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Ed Honda-Herald/Review Herb Guenther of the Arizona Department of Water Resources answers one of many questions concerning rural water development and management during a meeting at the Sierra Vista Public Library.

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past few years because of a drought throughout the southwest, Guenther said.

Some rivers, such as the Colorado, are about at half capacity.

Groundwater pumping is how people withdraw the important asset, Guenther said.

"It gets down to who has the deepest straw and who can pump faster," he said.

Water belongs to the people, Guenther said.

In many cases Arizona's laws are in conflict, especially regarding water use.

Local water use

Regardless of those problems, solutions for specific areas need to be found, and the Upper San Pedro River has one of the critical needs, the director said.

The San Pedro River has environmental problems, which the federal government is determined to take care of, especially since the U.S. Bureau of Land Management is responsible for the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area, most of which is in the Sierra Vista Subwatershed, Guenther said.

Without a solution, Fort Huachuca is in danger of being closed because the post and area government agencies on the federal, state and local levels, have agreed to bring the estimated 4,000 acre-feet a year water deficit into balance with the pumping of groundwater by 2011, Guenther said.

One challenge faces groundwater areas in the state, which have become main sources in some areas, as growth continues.

Regarding the Sierra Vista Subwatershed, even though there is a lot of ground water, "if you mine it you are going to lose the river," he said. This means that before that happens the federal government will close the more than \$1-billion-a-year economic engine for Cochise County, and an important one in the state, which is the fort.

The pressure on the state's water supply, even though Arizona has the second largest aquifer in the United States after Texas, is that growth continues unabated, Guenther said.

Although he has seen some signs of growth slowing down, he doesn't see it stopping.

There are a number of ways to address the issue, but all the stakeholders will have to come together in creating a solution, Guenther said.

Reaction to the idea

An audience member said he is concerned that like anything involving a state law, the district will be misused. Although no legislative proposal is even close to being submitted, David Greenberg said, "I would oppose this legislation."

Guenther emphasized the process is just beginning and that people will have the right to speak up for or against any proposal.

"We didn't vote for this," one lady in the audience exclaimed.

The ADWR director repeated that there is no proposal, not even a draft, to present to the Arizona Legislature.

Area resident Lou Kuttner said he believes properly drafted legislation can help address the subwatershed's problem, but cautioned all sides will have to be satisfied first.

Melissa Clayton, president-elect of the Southeast Arizona Association of Realtors and member of the Sierra Vista Housing Task Force, said she sees the straw proposal developed by SWAG "as an avenue to curb or stop development." She, like others who spoke out at the meeting, said any proposal should not be approved by legislators without the issue going before the voters who live in a pilot program region.

Local environmentalist Tricia Gerrodette said something must be done to protect the river and that may mean limiting development and water use.

Creating a pilot district is an idea she supports.

Guenther estimated it will take at least two sessions of the Arizona Legislature before anything final happens, and he challenged the people to become involved in the process, pro or con. The Upper San Pedro Partnership has volunteered to take part in the program, he said.

There will be more public meetings throughout rural Arizona as the process continues.

"I'll be back," Guenther said.

HERALD/REVIEW senior reporter Bill Hess can be reached at 515-4615.